

al-Khansa'

الخنساء

Poet of Early Islam

A.D. 600–670

One of the great poets of the period just before and during the emergence of Islam was al-Khansa' (Tumadir bint 'Amru al-Harith bin al-Sharid). Her life spans a time of unrest in the history of Arabia, the years before the rise of the Prophet Muhammad and the acceptance of his message. Tribesmen and townsmen competed for dominance, tribal battles were frequent, and the followers of Muhammad at first found great resistance to the new religion.

Al-Khansa' was born into a noble, nomadic tribe, the Madar, which was well known not only for its courage and heroism in battle, but also for its eloquence of language and talent in the composition and recitation of poetry.

Al-Khansa''s life began well. She was considered talented and beautiful despite the slightly turned nose which gave her the nickname of al-Khansa'. She refused to marry until she found the husband of her own choice. Later tragedy overcame her. Her two brothers, Mu'awiyah and Sakhar, to whom she was devoted, were killed in tribal skirmishes. After the death of her brothers, she was converted to Islam, and this added to her sorrow: her brothers had died before professing the faith.

Married three times, al-Khansa' outlived all her husbands. Four of her sons were killed in the Battle of Qadasiyah,¹ but on hearing the news, she is reported to have said, "I consider it an honor that they died for the sake of Islam. I ask only that God allow me to meet them in Paradise."

Her poetry, from the time of her brothers' deaths, assumed a dark and somber quality, but the most severe critics, past and present, attest to its magnificence.² Muhammad himself is said to have been very fond of her poetry and often asked her to recite for him when she was in his company.

Al-Khansa' regularly took part in the poetry contests of the time: several poets would gather and recite their work before a judge and an interested audience. On one such occasion, after two men poets had recited, the judgment angered the losing competitor. The judge is supposed to have turned to al-Khansa' and said, "What do you think? Recite some of your poetry for us." She replied with a line still considered classic, which has achieved the status of a proverb in Arabic.

Among desert guides, Sakhar was peerless
Like a beacon on the peak of a high mountain.

After hearing the line, the annoyed competitor is alleged to have said, "We've never seen a better woman poet than you." To this al-Khansa' replied, "Don't you want to say that I am the *best* poet, male or female?"

Al-Khansa' outlived most of her contemporary kinsmen. She died in A.D. 670 during the time of the Omayyad Caliph Mu'awiyah. She was seventy years old. According to legend, she died in the desert. Her work is still cited as a great example of early Arabic poetry.

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Lament for a Brother/al-Khansa'

What have we done to you, death
that you treat us so,
with always another catch
one day a warrior
the next a head of state;
charmed by the loyal
you choose the best.
Iniquitous, unequalling death
I would not complain
If you were just
but you take the worthy
leaving fools for us.

Fifty years among us
upholding rights
annulling wrongs,
impatient death
could you not wait a little longer
He still would be here
and mine, a brother
without a flaw. Peace
be upon him and Spring
rains water his tomb but
could you not wait
a little longer
a little longer,
you came too soon.